

POLITICS, MEMORY AND FILM IN THE CLASSROOM

Tamara Kolarić, Dublin City University

The teaching-learning challenge

I taught the Screening the '90s: Politics, Memory and Film in the Post-Yugoslav Countries course during the 2019/2020 academic year at Bard College Berlin, a liberal arts university in Germany, where I was then working as a lecturer in political science. I was asked to design an advanced course in Politics, which would also be cross-listed with the Ethics and Politics major, and would appeal to both the humanities and social sciences track students, many of whom were visiting students interested in film. I proposed a course, which would acquaint the students with the essential facts, debates and disagreements around the breakup of Yugoslavia and its aftermath during the 1990s and up to the present day.

The course needed to appeal to students across study tracks and with very different interests. Some of my students would have knowledge on the post-Yugoslav region (or be from the region), others not; some would have a disciplinary background in politics/social sciences, others not—which had to be taken into account in both teaching and evaluation design to allow everyone to feel engaged and empowered to learn. Students from second to fourth year of BA studies were eligible to take the course, so I had to find a way to explain the sometimes difficult, multi-faceted concepts without making it banal or repetitive to the older students, also to ensure that all students would feel invited to actively participate in the course.

While the course was on former Yugoslavia, the concepts and approaches we would study were transferable. My aim was for the students to be able to use the conceptual toolkit to unpack their own countries or areas of interest—while avoiding 'Balkanism' (Todorova 1997). I dreaded the students perceiving the area of the former Yugoslavia as somehow 'exotic', as this discursive frame often led to representing the area as a 'powder keg' and the conflicts as resulting from eternal ethnic hatreds. Instead, I wanted them to approach such interpretations—some of which we would read and watch together—with a critical eye, having gained a sense of the area through the disciplinary prism of power, nationalism, interest and manipulation.

Pedagogical method

Anticipating the diverse and international composition of my classroom, I decided that teaching with film was a good fit. To use film as a method in a political science classroom is not a novel practice. Engert and Spencer's pessimistic claim that in political science 'the idea of using movies as a pedagogical tool has remained at the margin' (Engert and Spencer 2009: 83) has since been challenged through film and politics courses offered at many universities. However, while literature does exist on teaching with film (e.g., Krukones 1989; Valeriano 2013), in designing the course I wasn't guided by insights on film as a pedagogical tool, but by my research expertise,

having written my dissertation on collective memory and film in post-Yugoslav Croatia. I also knew from my frequent use of film examples in other (methods, comparative politics) courses I taught that students respond to the practice well.

In this particular case, I expected films to bring the area closer to the students, encouraging interest and engagement; to help foster a culture of participation, including for students who would come without prior knowledge or would feel wary of interacting in class for other reasons. I also assumed films would serve as an aid for discussing complex concepts and sometimes challenging topics and materials. Films would also be part of the course content, enabling the class to explore the connection between political events, their mediatisation and memory in the region.

During the 14 weeks of the semester, we screened 11 films, nine from the former Yugoslav countries (Croatia, North Macedonia, Serbia) and one from Romania. Films were acquired through library DVD purchases and—because it was difficult to find many released on DVD with subtitles—the generosity of authors and producers, who I have reached out to explaining the course idea and who often responded extremely positively, granting us temporary viewing links or downloadable copies. In one case, because the film was relatively new (2015), I purchased the one-time screening rights from the distributor. All but one (documentary) were feature fiction films. This was supplemented by short films or segments screened during the regular sessions. Pre-movie, students were given instructions on what to pay special attention to during the screening.

The course combined interactive lectures, film screenings and post-screening discussions. The lectures introduced the weekly topics through a structured presentation, or a roundtable discussion guided by a set of questions/prompts. Each week's film was then analysed during the discussion session. One to two readings were assigned for both weekly sessions (not for the screenings). They included works by historians, political scientists and international relations scholars, memory scholars, legal scholars and peace activists, literature and film scholars, and also web pages, court transcripts, journal articles and reports.

Student assignments included presentation in pairs, position papers and a reflection paper. Following a consultation/literature recommendation session, each pair had to assign a reading to their classmates and present on one post-Yugoslav country, introducing the class to what they thought they needed to know (prompt questions were provided). The exercise was meant to help students develop knowledge on the region, gain insight into how narratives are created, train argument-building and presentation skills, and to encourage interaction and collaboration. Position papers were introduced to encourage students' thinking about the topics covered, while giving me insight into their understanding and progress. The film reflection paper invited students to engage in-depth with a film they enjoyed, catering to the skills of the more humanities-interested students.

The course, the students, and the teacher

I taught the course during the Spring semester 2019/2020. The class was small and diverse, with ten second-to-fourth year students from Bosnia (one), Eritrea (one), France (one), India (one), Serbia/Kosovo (one) and the United States (five). I was the sole teacher and had no teaching assistant. As expected, students came with different levels of disciplinary and area knowledge. The course met twice a week for seminar sessions (90 minutes, Mondays and Wednesdays), and on Tuesday evenings for film screenings.

Thematically, the course was divided into four parts. In the first part, we studied the history of the region and of the Yugoslav breakup and covered the concepts needed to analyse what had happened. We also talked about the creation of national(ist) narratives and the role of the political leaderships and media in the process. In the second part, we introduced the theories of collective memory, and talked about how the events of the 1990s became remembered as useful past, and about the role different actors—domestic and foreign—played in memory-making. The third part was dedicated to discussing characters crucial to or left out from the narrative: soldiers/veterans, women, national minorities. We talked about the role films play(ed) in creating national memory narrative(s), and unpacked some conceptual tools used to study them (e.g., trauma). Finally, in the last part of the course we talked about how memory evolved (or didn't) and why that might matter.

In terms of learning outcomes, I expected that upon completing the course, the students will be able to:

- explain the events surrounding the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s and critically contrast their differing interpretations by historians and political scientists
- explain the role cinema can play in the processes of nation-building and national memory, and critically assess the role it played in the post-Yugoslav context
- explain and apply in analysis the concepts of collective and cultural memory
- learn and practice applying key terms of political science such as power or nationalism.

As secondary goals, I expected my students to practice their writing and speaking skills, argument building and delivery, as well as to experience learning together and from each other.

The assignments were weighted as follows: 20% for class attendance and participation; 20% for the presentation (10% presentation + 10% submitted reading); 10% for the film reflection paper; 50% for the five position papers (5x10%).

Collected sources of data and methods

I evaluated the course outcomes by reflecting on three sources: student feedback collected through a form designed and administered by the university, completed by nine out of the ten students; my class observations as lecturer; and evaluation of students' assignments.

Findings

My first expectation was that films were a good way to increase engagement. This was partially corroborated through standardized course reviews, which provided data on overall course engagement but didn't include questions related specifically to the film component of the class. All but one student (neutral) felt strongly engaged or engaged by the course—a success considering that due to the pandemic we had to do a large part of the course online. All but one (neutral) agreed or strongly agreed that the course prompted discussions also outside of the classroom. One student explicitly said that the course was 'very engaging and interesting', while another mentioned that the lecturer managed to 'engage the students with the matter'; a third comment simply stated that 'both the course and instructor were great!'.

I also expected that integrating film into the course design would make the course more inviting for the diverse, international student group; this was also somewhat confirmed by the evaluations, addressing the course in general. One student stated that they 'loved' being in the class, adding that '[w]hile the topic of the course was extremely broad and at times incredibly intimidating (partly because lack of previous knowledge on the subject)' the instructor managed to create an 'inclusive environment'. Another referred to a 'comfortable atmosphere where we feel free to ask [...] questions when we wanted'.

With regard to learning, all surveyed students agreed that the course was challenging. Yet almost all strongly agreed (one agreed) they had acquired new knowledge. One student wrote about enjoying the film component as an integral part of the course—giving some weight to my expectation that films assisted in learning complex materials:

I enjoyed having different aspects of the course: history, politics, and film. Having films visualized the topics discussed and gave an insight to them and showed us how the director's narrative is shaped and what they want to portray with it. The course also provided a lot of history, which I found really great. Overall, I now understand more about the difficult questions about Yugoslavia, identity, and the layers of the war, which always bothered me.

My classroom observations paint a richer, albeit a more subjective picture. For one, they reinforced my expectation that using film would boost engagement. Prior to the classes moving online, the students attended the screenings regularly; while late screening times prevented us from debating a film right after the screening, a discussion usually emerged as we were leaving the premises. They seemed engaged by the films, which provoked laughter, anger, thoughtfulness. Students sometimes express the desire to learn more about topics observed on film, or to watch additional films.

I observed that using film as a class component helped make the course more inviting, too. While some students were more active in class than others, no one was unwilling to participate. The film

discussions seemed inviting especially for students with an arts/humanities background, who were sometimes a bit shy to speak in sessions focusing on the more conceptual, historical or explicitly political readings. The inclusion of a film reflection paper among the assessment methods enabled the film- and art-focused students in class to excel at a particular evaluation component, with some even watching additional films for their papers.

Films opened up complex concepts. For example, making a connection between a Romanian black-and-white western about Roma slavery and the concept of cultural memory was not easy. But this allowed us to explore the concept and the film in detail, which made the discussions more dynamic and the learning process more active.

Finally, watching films was meant to primarily foster learning, and my observations offer some confirmation that it did. Connections between the readings and the films were not always immediately obvious to the students, especially during the early course weeks. But as the course progressed, their insights became more interesting and more refined: they asked relevant questions, started making connections between the films' narratives, aesthetics and ethics, and often surpassed my expectations. Films fostered a particular kind of understanding. For example, seeing the differing representations of how the war started in Serbian and Croatian films made the students observe the differences in national narratives and of the power the media have in shaping them in a way that was more accessible than the assigned readings on the topic. This enabled moving from information absorption to being able to explain and critically contrast different narratives.

Watching films together inspired the students to make connections beyond that of the Yugoslav context, successfully applying what we discussed. An in-class screening of Jean-Gabriel Périot's short film about the liberation of Paris during WWII and the humiliation of French women accused of sleeping with the Nazi soldiers was an invitation for the French student to talk about their history education and its role in creating their 'Frenchness', leading the class to consider the relationship between education and national narratives in a new way. This also made the diversity of the classroom an advantage, as it became an integral part of the course. Finally, as the students developed their analytical disciplinary toolkit, films helped steer them away from seeing the former Yugoslavia as an exotic place of eternal ethnic hatreds, as they depicted the region as in many ways similar to their home countries.

I could observe student progress also through class discussions. Discussing one of the last films we watched, Kristijan Milić's *Broj 55* (2014), the students were more critical of the film than I was when I initially saw it, analysing how it draws on nationalist 1990s tropes and dehumanizes the enemy.

Finally, the relationship between film and learning was obvious in the students' papers. The different depictions of the conflict in Croatia in two films and the related course discussion reminded my Indian student of the India-Pakistan partition, and they ended up writing an excellent po-

sition paper utilising the knowledge of collective memory. One student wrote an analysis of a film on war crimes, tying it back to the historical materials we covered, as well as to Arendt's (1964) concept of 'banality of evil' that we had covered in class. My impression was that films helped foster a deeper engagement with the readings and made critical application of the concepts to different contexts easier.

Replicability in a different context

While I do think film works best as both a teaching method and part of the course content, teaching political science with film should be broadly applicable. An advantage to using film as a teaching method, aside from those listed above, is that it is not particularly costly or difficult to organise; all that is needed is a room with screening equipment and films (with subtitles). In classes including visually impaired students, reaching out to see how their needs can be accommodated is advised. One disadvantage is that the method is time-consuming: for the instructor, it takes time to find films and readings that complement them; joint screenings mean that the instructor and students will have to dedicate approximately two extra hours a week to the course. Finally, because teaching with film requires the whole class to engage in dialogue to elaborate how films and other class materials relate, it may be best suited for a small class size.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I described the course design for my BA course Screening the 90s: Politics, Memory and Film in the Post-Yugoslav Countries, taught at Bard College Berlin. The course was designed with the aim of teaching students about the breakup and aftermath of the former Yugoslavia, primarily through the prism of political science and memory studies. Films were used as a method to help increase engagement, encourage participation of all students in a diverse, international group, as well as foster critical discussion of learning materials and overall learning (while avoiding 'Balkanisation' of the '90s conflicts). Upon evaluation, I find that the course was successful in terms of achieving its learning objectives, at least partially due to the specific design.

References

- Arendt, H. (1964) *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the banality of evil*, New York: The Viking Press.
- Engert, S. and Spencer, A. (2009) 'International Relations at the movies: Teaching and learning about International Politics through film', *Perspectives. Review of International Affairs* 17:1, pp. 83-104.
- Krukones, M.G. (1989) 'Politics in fiction and film: An interdisciplinary approach to an abstract topic', *Innovative Higher Education* 14:1, pp. 57-5.

Todorova, M. (1997) *Imagining the Balkans*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Valeriano, B. (2013) 'Teaching introduction to International Politics with film', *Journal of Political Science Education* 9:1, pp. 52-72.

Summary

The aim of the course Screening the 90s: Politics, Memory and Film in the Post-Yugoslav Countries was twofold: to acquaint the students with the basic facts, debates and disagreements around the breakup of Yugoslavia and its aftermath, and to explore the role that media representation played in remembering the events and their consequences. To achieve this aim, I used feature fiction films as both a teaching method—to foster student engagement and participation, encourage learning and avoid 'Balkanising' the region—and a part of the course content (films as discursive and memory artefacts). I combined them with cross-disciplinary literature, individual and in-pair assignments for further engagement, skills development and evaluation. Integrating film into course design as both a teaching method and a part of the course content was found useful when working with international student groups without much prior knowledge, fostering engagement and student participation while also assisting in achieving the course learning goals.

Keywords

film and politics, memory studies, political science, teaching with film



Tamara Kolaric is an Assistant Professor in Social Sciences with the School of Applied Languages and Intercultural Studies, Dublin City University. She taught the course Screening the 90s: Politics, Memory and Film in the Post-Yugoslav Countries at Bard College Berlin, where she was the Global Teaching Fellow for the 2019/2020 academic year. tamara.kolaric@gmail.com